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Purificatory Hermeneutics of Desire

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In one of the numerous fieldwork trips depicted in the film *Kinsey*, Bill Condon’s adaptation of the life and work of the entomologist-turned-sex-researcher Alfred C. Kinsey, two sex researchers end their day of data collection with the following conversation:

Clyde Martin. So what do you think you are now?  
Alfred Kinsey. *(nervously)* Probably around a …three.  
Clyde Martin. Have you ever done anything about it?  
Alfred Kinsey. *(shakes his head)*  
Clyde Martin. Would you like to?*

The “three” to which Alfred Kinsey refer is his own assessment of his sexual preference on a heterosexual-homosexual rating scale developed by Kinsey’s research group. This scale begins with the assumption that many people’s exposure to notions of sexuality begins with the binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Kinsey’s scale ranges from 0-6.²
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Exclusively heterosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Predominately heterosexual, only incidentally homosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Predominately heterosexual, but more than incidentally homosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Equally heterosexual and homosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Predominately homosexual, but more than incidentally heterosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Predominately homosexual, only incidentally heterosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Exclusively homosexual</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After Alfred and Clyde’s conversation, they share a French kiss, and venture into an experiment of their own sexuality. The factuality of this scene is not critical to this discussion but the manner of its depiction is critical to the genesis of this essay.

Most critics and researchers of sexual history would term the above encounter a homoerotic scene. ‘Homosexuality’ is a roughly defined term which categorizes all sexual behavior between two same-sex individuals. The confusion concerning the definition of this term begins in the linguistic roots of the term. If the prefix is taken from the Greek homo then homosexuality means “love of the same sex.” Yet if the prefix is of Latin origin, then the signification of homo changes to “human being” as in homo sapiens or wise human beings. Depending on the derivation, the word homosexual might mean either same-sex love or love of humanity. These possible definitions for this term highlight two schools of thought that have wrestled for the identification for the role of homosexual love within human society.

The confusion with this term belies the fact that Kinsey thought “homosexuality” was the least-biased one among a plethora of other expressions that also describe sexual relations between two individuals of the same biological gender. The difficulty in finding the perfect signifier to denote this notion represents the confusion inherent in the topic of same-gender sex. Kinsey’s two-volume study contributed, for the first time, statistically significant data on the sexual behavior of the American population. Yet even Kinsey uses pre-established categories of sexual behavior to evaluate the behavior of his human subjects. Kinsey also took into consideration the prejudice of established terms:
The terms sexual inversion, intersexuality, transsexuality, the third sex, psychosexual hermaphroditism and others have been applied not merely to designate the nature of the partner involved in the sexual relation, but to emphasize the general opinion that individuals engaging in homosexual activity are neither male nor female, but persons of mixed sex. These latter terms are, however, most unfortunate, for they provide an interpretation in anticipation of any sufficient demonstration of the fact; and consequently they prejudice investigations of the nature and origin of homosexual activity.⁵

It is clear that Kinsey tried his best to use unprejudiced terms, which would allow his investigation to remain neutral. If this is his goal then one might wonder why he chose to use the term ‘homosexuality’ and also decide to select the same-sex connotation over the love of humanity definition. It is clear from this example that even with the best of intentions Kinsey still used classifications that gave an unjustified bias to his study of sexuality.

The twentieth-century penchant for classification is not unique to Kinsey. Most researchers in the field of Greek sexuality place the love between an older man and a younger boy under the modern notion of pederasty. Most authors in the sexuality field will also place pederasty within the larger category of homosexuality. Kenneth Dover and Michel Foucault both argue against the use of present day classifiers to categorize the sexual behaviors of Greek society. Yet even when commenting on the work of these two researchers, authors such as David Cohen cannot resist using modern day classifications for sexual behavior:

Kenneth Dover and Michel Foucault have argued that the modern dichotomization of sexuality as heterosexuality/homosexuality does not apply to the ancient world, and they have shown how distinctions between active and passive roles in male sexuality defined the contours of the permissible and impermissible in paederastic courtship and other forms of homoerotic behavior.⁷

Even when explaining Dover and Foucault’s arguments, Cohen continues to use modern terms to describe Greek notions of sexuality. The terms “paederastic courtship” and “homoerotic behavior” are also modern terms not suitable for application to the study of Greek sexuality. Yet contrary to the habit of classifying every detail of Greek sexual behavior, no distinction is made
between the different types of sexual activity that might take place during the coupling between older men and younger boys. Much like Kinsey and Martin’s love scene, the actual copulation between the older male and younger boy is not revealed. Instead the sex acts are left to the imagination of the reader and then labeled with general terms such as “pederasty” or “homosexual behavior.” Using these modern and non-specific terms, scholars hastily point to the paradoxical nature of Greek notions concerning sexual relationship between older and younger males.

In *Law, Sexuality and Society*, David Cohen provides an excellent example of this type of scholarship which promotes the complexity and confusion of Greek sexuality. After using generalized terms to explain both Dover and Foucault’s arguments for the normality of love between older and younger males, the author proceeds to point out in his “…opinion, an exploration of Greek homosexuality ought to begin by insisting very strongly on the profundity of the conflicts which permeated Athenian values and practices in this area.” Cohen then uses Pausanias’s speech in Plato’s *Symposium* to explain that the inherent ambiguity in the Athenian notion of sexuality is the result of “the simultaneous approbation and censure which social norms and legal rules attach to the pursuit of a Paederastic courtship.”

Using artwork on Greek vases and the writings of Plato, other scholars suggest that the love between younger boys and older men was a social behavior that laws were inept to control. Robert Flacelière makes such a point by describing Greek society as being unable to resist the temptation of pederasty:

> But in Greece, though pederasty was forbidden by law in most of the cities, it had become so fashionable that no one troubled to conceal it. On the contrary, such tendencies were respected and even approved. Plato himself recommended their cultivation as a necessary preliminary to the successive stages of a philosophic understanding of Being.  

Flacelière chooses to define pederasty as a sexual behavior so infectious that Athenian law was unable to stop its spread within the polis.

Both Cohen and Flacelière make use of the term ‘pederasty’ and yet leave their readers uncertain as to its meaning. The application of such a vague modern term upon Greek sexuality greatly distorts their conclusions about Greek society’s acceptance of sexual copulation between younger boys and older men.
Kenneth J. Dover does not make the same error in *Greek Homosexuality*. Instead, he suggests the Greeks were indifferent to same-sex relations that fulfill certain requirements imposed by Greek society:

This paradigm included ritualistic conventions such as the requirement that the boy be courted and play hard to get, that his reputation be protected, that he not be anally penetrated, that he not receive money, and that he not enjoy the “intercrural” sex – the older man’s penis rubbing between his thighs. Any condemnation of same-sex relations derived not from a disapproval of such relations per se, but from a failure of the participants in such a relationship to respect these conventions, thus challenging the political power structure they reflected.\(^\text{11}\)

Dover introduces a new term “intercrural sex” that does not have modern preconceived notions. Two examples of Greek vase artwork help to define the actual process of intercrural sex. The first example is artwork on a Greek vase.

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Martin Kilmer utilizes Dover’s new term for sexual behavior between an older man and a younger boy. He describes the above vase scene saying, “the position most commonly adopted is standing intercrural copulation, face-to-face, the passive partner upright, the penetrating partner with his knees bent, legs outside his partner’s legs, and usually slightly stooped” (Kilmer 15). He is also careful to note that this scene is the ideal version of intercrural sex where “the youth shows no erection” (16). The second example is from a pelikê from Mykonos.


Both Martin Kilmer and J. K. Dover point to this second image as an example of the proper courting ritual between an older male and a younger boy. Martin goes further and claims that this second example “is one of the best-preserved examples of intercrural intercourse in progress.” Again in this copulation scene, the lack of arousal and interest is clearly demonstrated by the younger boy:

[The youth] stands upright, looking fondly at the hare he holds by the ears in his right hand. In his left hand he holds the looped end of a leash which runs to the collar of a seated dog of a generally greyhound look...[The boy] seems to be paying attention strictly to these gifts, not to the things that are being done to him.”
The artwork of these two vases and Dover’s definition of intercrural sex gives both form and delineation of the substance of Pausanias’ speech in Plato’s *Symposium*. Dover’s intercrural sex becomes synonymous with what Pausanias terms as noble love:

The Love of Heavenly Aphrodite. This goddess, whose descent is purely male (hence this love is for boys)…[And those who are moved purely by this Heavenly Love] prefer older [boys] whose cheeks are showing the first traces of a beard - a sign that they have begun to form minds of their own. I am convinced that a man who falls in love with a young man of this age is generally prepared to share everything with the one he loves – he is eager, in fact to spend the rest of his own life with him.15

In clearly defining intercrural sex, Dover creates a term that corresponds to Pausanias’ Heavenly Love. This is not a base form of love that requires the external enforcement of Greek law. Instead, this noble form of love encourages a stable life-long relationship between the boy and the man and enhances the intellectual development of the younger boy.

Applying the term intercrural sex to Greek sexuality also resolves the dilemmas pointed out by Cohen and Flacelière. The laws and punishments identified by these two authors are in condemnation of same-sex practices that no longer conform to the protocols of intercrural sex. Instead, the younger boy has given in too easily to the coarse pleasure of anal sex. Pausanias also refers to the need for law in cases where the man/boy couple resorts to this transgressive form of sexual practice. He continues in his speech, “but those other lovers, the vulgar ones, need external restraint…These vulgar lovers are the people who have given love such a bad reputation that some have gone so far as to claim that taking any man as a lover is in itself disgraceful.”16 Likewise the lack of distinction made between intercrural sex and anal penetration within our modern notions of Greek sexuality has caused many researchers to promote that any love between an older man and a younger boy is forbidden by Greek law and society.

The speech of Diotima further develops Pausanias’ notion of noble love. She explains the rites of love that lead to the highest mystery:

A lover who goes about this matter correctly must begin in his youth to devote himself to beautiful bodies. First, if the leader leads aright, he
should love one body and beget beautiful ideas there; then he should realize that the beauty of any one body is brother to the beauty of any other and that if he is to pursue beauty of form he’d be very foolish not to think that the beauty of all bodies is one and the same. When he grasps this, he must become a lover of all beautiful bodies, and he must think that this wild gaping after just one body is a small thing and despise it.¹⁷

Diotima’s description echoes the noble love of Pausanias. She describes the progression of thoughts that should occur in both the older man and the younger boy during intercrural intercourse. In a proper relationship, the guidance of the older man should set the younger boy upon a ladder of love that will allow him to realize true Beauty.¹⁸ This answers the present day dilemma of defining homosexuality as either the love of human beings or as the love between same-sex individuals. Kinsey is correct in stating that homosexuality for the Greeks meant same-sex love. By following Diotima’s definition, the end result of such same-sex love is the love of beauty in all of humanity. This is the reason why the Latin definition for ‘homosexuality’ is defined as love of human beings.

Intercrural sex as the noble form of love between younger boys and older men is both allowed and promoted within Greek society. Yet numerous laws and social customs ensure that the man/boy pair does not fall into the practice of coarse love. Within proper protocol, the older man serves as a teacher who introduces notions of beauty to the younger boy. Likewise in realizing the beauty of the ideas created within the younger boy, the older man also grows in his intellectual development. The result of intercrural sex, a purificatory act of desire, is the production of ideas and knowledge that is the immortal progeny of the union between the younger and older males.

The clear distinction made between the coarse anal sex and noble intercrural sex is critical to our modern day understanding of Greek sexuality. It is also clear that laws and social constraints in Greek society ensure the restriction of coarse sex and promote the nobler intercrural sex. This form of sexual behavior provides for Greek society a method of introducing young Greek males to the male-dominated public sphere of Greek life. This coupling between the older male and the younger boy is an opportunity for the younger boy to practice sôphrosunê or temperance and self-control, which is a virtue of the mind.¹⁹ The proper practice of intercrural sex also provides a bridge for young Greek men to turn away from a mere preoccupation with physical sexuality and
harbor a love for the pursuit of both knowledge and wisdom that is the final product of this noble form of intercourse. Instead of creating physical progeny, intercrural sex provides Greek society with a new generation of male adults that are in love with contributing new ideas and thoughts to the Athenian society.

Yet the separation between coarse and noble love is no longer prevalent in our modern day notions of sexuality. Having clearly denoted the Greek concepts of noble and coarse sex, it is important to trace the disappearance of such a distinction between the two forms of sexual practice. After Plato’s time, “reflections[s] on the love of boys lost some of its intensity, its seriousness, its vitality, if not its topicality.” 20 Yet “this does not mean that the practice disappeared or that it became the object of a disqualification. All the texts plainly show that it was still common and still regarded as a natural thing.” 21 What occurs is “obsolescence not of itself, but of the problem; a decline in the interest one took in it; a fading of the importance it was granted in philosophical and moral debate.” 22

The practice of intercrural sex between younger boys and older men was an accepted part of Greek society until the time of Plutarch. In Dialogue on Love, Plutarch begins to break away from traditional Greek views of love for younger boys:

First, there is the shift resulting from the discussion itself; the question of the choice the beloved must make between his two lovers surreptitiously becomes the question of love in its two possible forms - for boys and for girls. And second, the shift, made possible by the paradoxical situation of the intrigue, which confers on the relationship with a woman the same ethical potential as the relationship with a man...What is wanted is to form a conception of a single love. This conception will not reject the characteristic values of pederastic love. Instead, it will include them in a broader, more complete form, which ultimately only the relationship with women, and more precisely with the wife, will be able to put into practice. 23

By raising the ethical standards of love for women to the same level as the love for boys, Plutarch and the Greeks of his time began to shift the purpose for sexual relationships toward procreation. It was not that intercrural sex became forbidden, but by claiming that both physical and intellectual progeny was possible through the love for women, the love for boys was made to seem inadequate. “To this fundamental role and this germinative function of physical pleasure, Plutarch gives a solemn
historical sanction.” Plutarch even goes as far to echo Diotima’s speech in Symposium by stating, “Physical union with a lawful wife is the beginning of friendship, a sharing, as it were, in great mysteries.” Plutarch continues to proclaim that sexual pleasure between a man and his wife “is like the seed out of which mutual respect [timē], kindness [charis], affection [agapēsis], and loyalty [pistis] daily grow between husband and wife.”

Promoting procreation as the basic function of sexual activity, Plutarch argues that sex between males and females should be dedicated to procreation. Any sexual act without the intention of producing physical offspring was considered a waste to society. Relying on the necessity of procreation, Plutarch defines gender roles within society as the opposition between male and female. Focusing on the possibility of creating both physical and intellectual progeny, Plutarch promotes male and female love as the more value-conscious form of sexual relationship that should be encouraged by the state.

Since Plutarch’s time, the benefits of man/boy love were forgotten and have, at best, been seen as a wasteful form of sexual activity. Victorian prudish notions of sexuality have determined the gender roles of male and females; males are the active partner in opposition to their passive female companions. This is the notion of a clear delineation between male and female, and the negative perception of love between men and younger boys is still the dominant notion of sexuality within our present society.

A clear analysis of sexuality within Greek society does not provide us with a set of permanent criteria for defining gender and sexuality within Greek society. Yet following Dover and Foucault’s disciplined usage of language and clear definitions, the study of Greek sexuality is an opportunity to practice the analysis of the role of sex within a given society. Unlike historical Greece, our present day society is still in the process of evolving its own notions of gender and sexuality. Clear definitions and accurate analysis are critical to illuminate the role that our society assigns to sex and its practice. The habitual application of these sound analytical techniques will ensure the development of a purificatory hermeneutics of desire that will define both our present and future notions of what constitutes the ‘norm’ of our sexuality.
ENDNOTES

3. Ibid, 612.
6. Ibid, 638.
8. Ibid, 173.
17. Ibid, 57-58.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid, 197.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
BIBLIOGRAPHY